THE PLAYBOOK

The Hire

Bringing in your first operations person. What the role actually is, how to test for judgment, and the mistakes that waste a good hire.

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OPENING

The hire you keep postponing

There is a point in most small businesses where the founder is visibly the constraint, everyone can see it, and the hire that would fix it keeps getting deferred.

The reasons given are usually cost or timing. The real reason is more often that nobody is confident what the role is. It is easy to write a job description for a developer. It is genuinely hard to write one for the person who is going to absorb everything that is currently falling through gaps.

So the hire is postponed, then made in a hurry when something breaks, then judged against a standard nobody wrote down.

The most common failure is not hiring the wrong person. It is hiring a capable person into a role that was never defined, then concluding they were the problem.

This is written for the founder making that hire, and it is also worth reading if you are the candidate, because it tells you exactly what a well-run process looks like and what to ask when you are in one that is not.

CHAPTER 1

Decide what you are actually hiring

Before writing anything, answer one question honestly: what is currently not happening that you want to be happening?

Not what tasks you would like removed. What outcomes are being missed. Those produce very different hires.

Take one ordinary week and list everything you personally touched. Then mark each item as work only you can do, work somebody could be trained to do, and work that should not require a person at all. The middle column is the job. The third column is a systems project, and hiring a person to do it permanently is expensive.

Then write the three outcomes. Not responsibilities. Outcomes, with a way to know they happened. "The weekly leadership rhythm runs without me" is an outcome. "Support the leadership team" is a wish.

Now check the cost of not hiring. Count the hours in the middle column and multiply by what your time is worth, or by what those hours would generate if spent on the thing only you can do. That number is usually larger than the salary and it is the number that ends the deferral.

> **If you cannot write down three outcomes, you are not ready to hire. You are ready to spend a week working out what you actually need.**

CHAPTER 2

Assistant, operator, or chief of staff

These three titles get used interchangeably and cost very different amounts. Choosing the wrong one produces either an expensive person doing simple work or an underqualified person quietly drowning.

01 Executive assistant

Your time, attention and preparation. Owns the calendar, the inbox, travel, meeting preparation and follow-through. The right hire when your problem is that your own week is unmanageable.

02 Operations manager

How the work gets done. Owns process, tooling, reporting and the recurring machinery of the business. The right hire when the problem is that things happen differently every time.

03 Chief of staff

Whether the right things happen across the company. Owns priorities, cadence and cross-team follow-through, working mostly through people who do not report to them. Expensive, and usually premature below about thirty people.

Most small businesses hiring their first operations person actually need the first two combined, and the market for that person is genuinely strong: someone senior enough to design systems and willing to run them personally.

Do not use a chief of staff title to attract a stronger candidate for an assistant role. It works once, it is discovered in month two, and it costs you the person you went to trouble to attract.

CHAPTER 3

Writing a role that attracts the right person

Operations job posts are mostly interchangeable, which is why the good candidates cannot tell your company apart from the four others they are reading.

Lead with the problem, not the responsibilities. "We are eight people, the founder is the bottleneck on roughly six recurring processes, and we need somebody to take them and make them run without him." That paragraph does more filtering than a list of twenty bullet points, and the right person recognises themselves in it immediately.

State the three outcomes. The ones you wrote in chapter one. Candidates who can do the job will read them and know; candidates who cannot will self-select out, which saves everyone time.

Publish the salary range. Withholding it wastes your time and theirs, and in a market where a senior executive assistant in the United States sits roughly between $76,750 and $97,250 by Robert Half's 2026 guide, candidates already have a reasonable idea. Hiding the number mainly filters out people with options.

Be honest about the mess. "Nothing is documented, several things are held together by the founder's memory, and you would be the first person in this seat." The candidates who find that appealing are exactly the ones you want, and the ones it deters would have been unhappy by month three.

CHAPTER 4

Screening for judgment

Experience is easy to verify and it is the weaker predictor. Judgment is what determines whether this hire works, and it can be tested directly if you stop asking hypothetical questions.

Ask what they did, not what they would do. "Tell me about a time your executive made a decision you thought was wrong" reveals far more than any scenario, because it cannot be answered from a template and the details either exist or they do not.

Give them a real, messy situation from your week. Not a puzzle. Something that actually happened, including the ambiguity. What would you want to know, what would you do first, what would you escalate. You are watching how they decompose it, and whether they ask about the constraint that matters.

Test for what they do when they do not know. Ask about something they have not encountered. The good answer names an assumption, states what they would verify and who they would ask. The weak answer is confident invention, and in this role confident invention is the expensive failure mode.

Probe how they handle being wrong. "Tell me about a process you built that did not work." Someone who cannot produce an example either has not built much or has not examined it honestly.

THE SINGLE MOST USEFUL QUESTION

"What did you stop doing in your last role, and how did you decide?" It reveals prioritisation, the courage to remove work, and whether they think in systems or in tasks. Almost nobody prepares for it.

CHAPTER 5

The paid trial

For a role this dependent on judgment and fit, an interview process alone is a poor instrument. A short paid trial is the highest-signal step available and remarkably few small companies use one.

Pay properly and scope it tightly. A day or two of real work at a fair rate. Not a take-home exercise designed to look like an exam, and never unpaid work that happens to be useful to you.

Give them something genuinely representative. A messy recurring process, a week of your calendar to critique, a report to rebuild. The task should require them to ask questions, because how they ask is most of what you are evaluating.

Judge the questions more than the output. A strong operator will ask about the constraint you did not mention, the person who actually approves things, and what happens if it is late. Those questions are the job.

Watch the write-up. Ask for a short summary of what they did and what they would do next. Written clarity under mild time pressure predicts most of this role better than any interview answer.

Two days of this tells you more than four rounds of conversation, and it lets the candidate evaluate you honestly too, which matters more than most employers admit. A trial they walk away from has saved you both a great deal.

CHAPTER 6

The offer and the first ninety days

A good hire can still be wasted in the first quarter, and it is almost always the same three ways.

Write down what success looks like at ninety days before they start. Two or three sentences. This is the document you will both refer back to, and its absence is why so many early reviews become arguments about expectations nobody stated.

Give them a month of watching before expecting change. The instinct is to want improvements in week two. What you actually want is an accurate map, gathered by asking everyone what should be happening that is not. Improvements built on a month of listening stick; improvements built on week two get quietly reversed.

Then hand over one thing completely. Not partially, not with you checking. Fully, including the authority to decide inside it. A first hire who is never allowed to own anything outright learns to check everything, and you will experience that as a lack of initiative that you personally created.

And correct out loud from the beginning. Silently fixing their work is the fastest way to end up doing the job yourself again by month three, with the added cost of a salary and a person who does not understand why things feel strained.

> **The most expensive hiring mistake is not the wrong person. It is the right person, never given anything to own.**

CHAPTER 7

Why good hires fail here

Four patterns, and every one is an employer failure rather than a candidate one.

The role was never defined, so the standard moved. Work is judged against a picture in the founder's head that nobody else can see. The person is competent and permanently slightly wrong, which is exhausting and eventually terminal.

Responsibility was given without authority. They own an outcome and cannot make the decisions inside it, so everything routes back to the founder and the hire appears to have created work rather than absorbed it.

Nobody protected time for them in the first month. A founder too busy to onboard the person hired to make them less busy is a common and self-defeating pattern, and the new person learns in week two how much this hire mattered.

They were hired to fix a problem that was actually the founder's behaviour. No operations hire can fix a leader who decides in corridors, changes priorities weekly and does not follow the systems they asked for. If the constraint is how you work, a hire will not remove it, it will only give it somewhere to land.

That last one is worth sitting with before you post the role, because it is the only one that hiring cannot solve and the one most often diagnosed as a bad hire.

CLOSING

Hire the judgment

Hard skills can be taught. Tooling can be learned in a fortnight. Judgment, work ethic and the willingness to own something messy are much harder to develop and are what actually determine whether this hire changes your business.

So the process is simple even though it is uncommon. Write the three outcomes before writing the advert. Lead with the problem rather than the responsibilities. Publish the range. Ask what they did rather than what they would do. Pay for two days of real work and pay attention to the questions they ask. Then write down what success looks like at ninety days, give them a month to listen, and hand over one thing completely.

None of it is expensive. Most of it is skipped because hiring usually happens in a hurry, at the point where the pain has become acute, which is precisely the worst moment to be making a careful decision.

The fix is to start the definition work now, while it is merely annoying. The week you spend writing down the three outcomes is the week that makes the eventual hire work.

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